



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Statement on International Day of the World's Indigenous People

August 9, 2021

Today, August 9, we celebrate the indigenous people of the world who are the protectors of their land and natural environment. In many parts of Myanmar, different groups of indigenous people possess unique practices, traditions and culture. Unfortunately, indigenous groups in Myanmar face many challenges that threaten their enjoyment of their rights and identity. Decades of conflict have brought suffering on ethnic groups like the Chin, Rohingya, Shan and Karen. At the same time, Myanmar's ethnic people have also faced other violations of their rights including threats to their distinct cultures, languages, and identities; as well as development projects by the Tatmadaw leading to land confiscations, forced displacement, and negative environmental and social impacts.

On June 11, 2021, KHRG and Karen Rivers Watch released a joint statement condemning the State Administration Council's (SAC) announcement to push ahead with the construction of the Hatgyi hydropower mega-dam on the Salween River. KHRG reiterates that the construction of the Hatgyi dam will be severely detrimental to the ecosystems in the area, as well as to people's livelihoods, wellbeing, and cultural identity. Further, construction of the Hatgyi dam will exacerbate the dire humanitarian crisis in Southeast Myanmar caused by the ongoing SAC military offensives.

Since the February 2021 coup, hostilities between the SAC and ethnic armed organizations have intensified across the country. In Southeast Myanmar alone, the SAC has indiscriminately bombed and shelled villages which has killed, injured, and forcibly displaced thousands of villagers. Villagers who have been forced to flee into the jungles and caves, or across the Salween River into Thailand are in desperate need of basic supplies such as food, water, shelter, and medicines. Many villagers are also afraid to return to their lands as they fear the SAC's indiscriminate airstrikes and ground artillery attacks.

In addition to the suffering faced by indigenous people as a result of intensified conflicts in ethnic lands, the COVID-19 pandemic also adds to the suffering of the ethnic people in Myanmar. In rural areas of Southeast Myanmar alone, where healthcare services are extremely limited, many villagers have no choice but to turn to home-based care. Rather than allowing patients access to life-saving medical care through non-SAC channels such as ethnic healthcare providers, in early July the SAC prohibited the sale of medical oxygen to private clinics and individuals throughout the country. At the same time, the SAC is actively undermining the Karen National Union's COVID-19 response policies in Karen State. Recently, the SAC has destroyed the KNU's COVID-19 screening checkpoints and disapproved of KNU travel restrictions in Karen State because of the potential impact on the movement of SAC soldiers in the region. The SAC's weaponization of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to many avoidable deaths.

As the COVID-19 pandemic and the SAC's military coup have introduced new challenges to Myanmar's indigenous people, KHRG would like to call upon the international community to not only support the country's ethnic groups in defence of their rights, but also to celebrate their resilience in the face of adversity and persecution.